
NATURALIZATIONS, FISCAL YEAR 1998

This report will appear as a chapter in the forthcoming *1998 Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service*. All references to Appendixes, Charts, Tables, and other sections of the *Statistical Yearbook* appear as they will in the final *Yearbook* edition.

V. NATURALIZATIONS

This section presents information on the number and characteristics of persons who naturalize in the United States.

Naturalization refers to the conferring of U.S. citizenship, by any means, upon a person after birth. (See Appendix 3, p. A.3-7.) There are five ways of becoming a U.S. citizen: naturalization in a court ceremony; naturalization through an administrative hearing; derivation through the naturalization of parents; acquisition at birth abroad to citizen parents; and legislation conferring citizenship upon certain groups of persons (see Limitations of Data). As part of the naturalization process, applicants pledge an oath of allegiance to the United States, thereby renouncing allegiance to their former countries of nationality.

U.S. Naturalization Program

To naturalize, an immigrant must fulfill certain requirements set forth in the Immigration and Nationality Act concerning age, lawful admission, and residence in the United States. These general naturalization provisions specify that an alien must: be at least 18 years of age; have been lawfully admitted to the United States for permanent residence; and have resided in the country continuously for at least 5 years. Additional requirements include the ability to speak, read, and write the English language; knowledge of the U.S. government and U.S. history; and good moral character. In 1998, immigrants naturalizing under the general provisions accounted for 96 percent of those for whom the nationality law provision was reported. (Provision of the law was not reported for 5 percent of naturalizations.)

The special provisions of naturalization law exempt aliens from one or more of the requirements of the general provisions. Spouses and children of U.S. citizens and military classes constitute the main categories of special naturalization. The majority of people naturalizing as spouses of U.S. citizens may do so in 3 years rather than the 5 years prescribed under the general provisions. Of all new citizens in 1998 with naturalization law provision reported, 4 percent naturalized under the special provisions. Children who immigrate with their parents generally do not apply to naturalize, but derive U.S. citizenship through the naturalization of their parents. Children adopted by U.S. citizens are eligible for administrative naturalization by the INS. These children

may be naturalized in court ceremonies prior to reaching age 18—there are no residency requirements. Under certain conditions, aliens who served honorably during war time and other conflicts may naturalize without prior admission to permanent resident status. Also, they need not have resided in the United States for a particular length of time. Aliens with lawful permanent resident status who have served honorably in the Armed Forces of the United States also are entitled to certain exemptions from the general naturalization requirements.

Every applicant for naturalization (age 18 and over) must file an application, Form N-400 Application for Naturalization. All aliens filing these applications who meet the preliminary documentary requirements must be interviewed by INS officers to determine their eligibility to naturalize. During the interview the officer discerns the applicant's knowledge and understanding of the English language, as well as of the history and government of the United States. Recently, applicants have been allowed to take standardized tests that are used to determine knowledge and reading and writing capabilities. Those applicants found qualified are scheduled for an oath ceremony before a judge or district director.

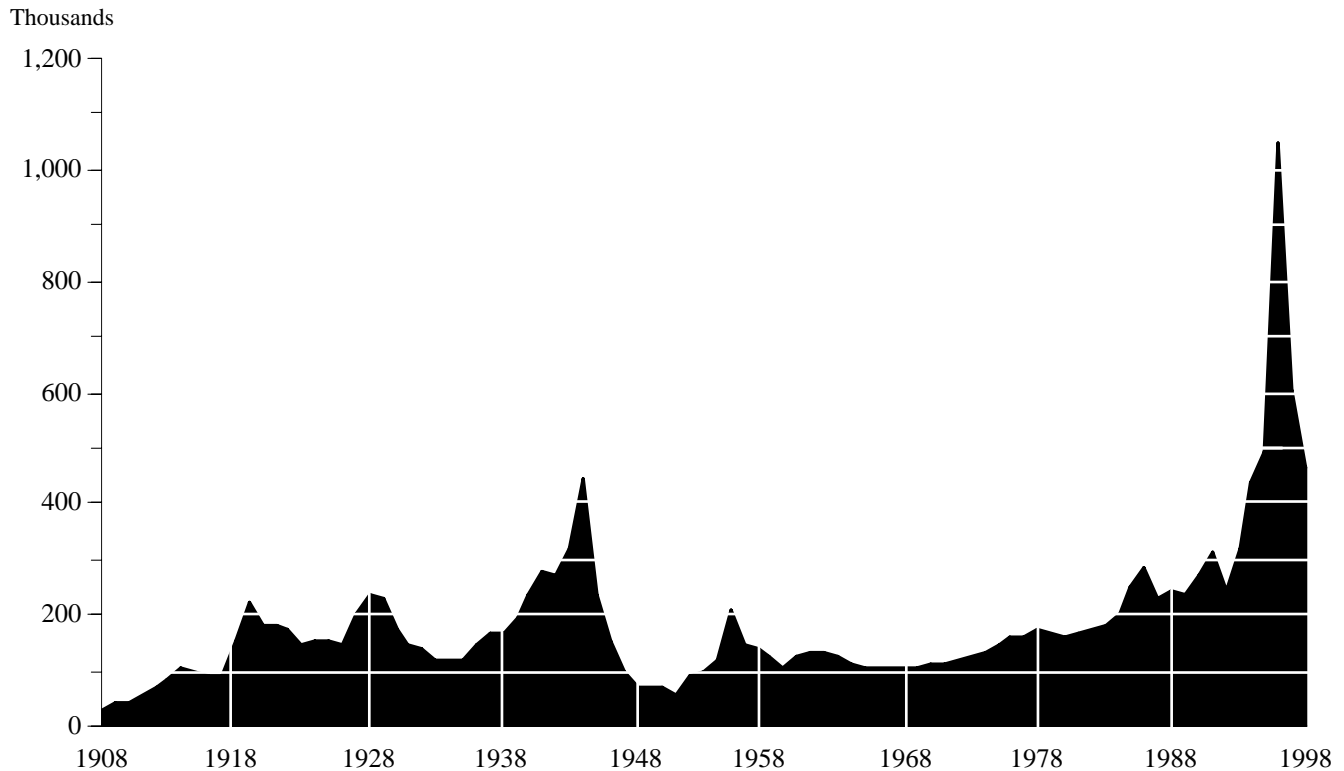
More than 463,000 people were naturalized during 1998.

Data Overview

INS naturalized 463,060 persons in fiscal year 1998. This number would have been much higher were it not for a backlog of more than one million naturalization applications pending a decision at the end of 1997. As a consequence, caution should be exercised in drawing conclusions from these data regarding recent trends in naturalization and in the characteristics of persons naturalizing.

Despite the backlog, the number of naturalizations in 1998 was the fourth highest in U.S. history, following the all-

Chart N
Persons Naturalized: Fiscal Years 1908-98



Source: 1987-98, Table 45; 1908-86, previous *Yearbooks*.

time record of 1,044,689 in 1996, 598,225 in 1997, and 441,979 in 1944 during World War II (Chart N). Between 1945 and 1995, the annual number of persons naturalizing never exceeded 400,000. The increase in naturalizations during the 1990s is attributable to a number of factors:

- ◆ In fiscal year 1992, the INS initiated a “Green Card Replacement Program”, which by requiring long-term permanent residents to replace their permanent resident alien cards with new, more counterfeit-resistant cards, led some to naturalize instead.
- ◆ In 1994, the first of the 2.68 million illegal aliens who were granted legal permanent resident status under the provisions of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 became eligible to naturalize.
- ◆ During 1994-96, legislation was passed restricting public benefits for non-citizens, including Proposition 187 in California in 1994, and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act in 1996.

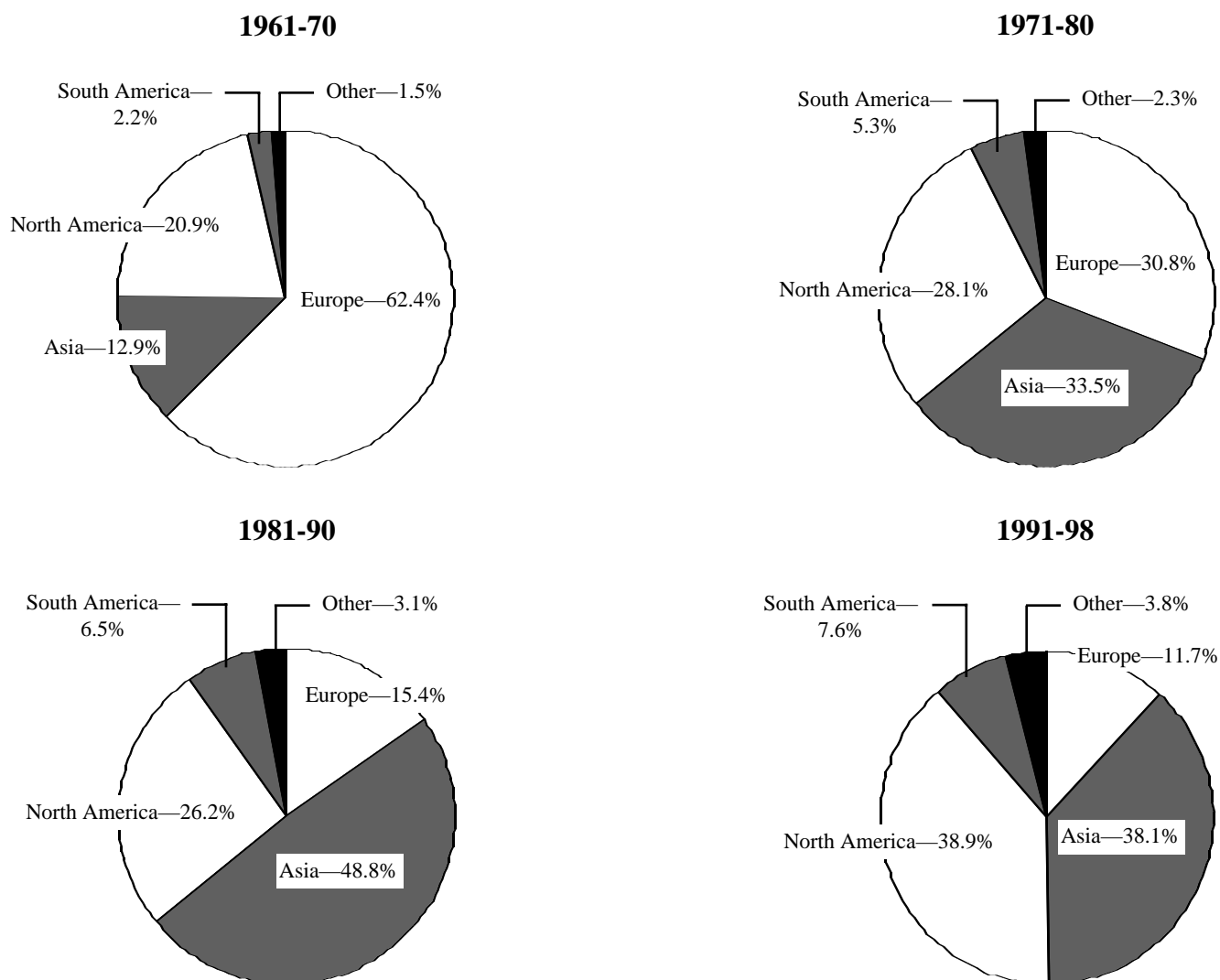
- ◆ In 1995, the INS implemented the Citizenship USA initiative, which was designed to streamline the naturalization process and greatly increased naturalizations during 1996.

Region and country of birth (Tables 50-54)

The number of persons naturalizing each year lags behind the number immigrating by at least five years due to the five-year residency requirement for naturalization for most legal immigrants. Until the 1970s, the majority of persons naturalizing were born in Europe because country quotas in immigration law favored those countries. The regional origin of persons immigrating and naturalizing shifted from Europe to Asia following the elimination of the country quotas in amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) of 1965 and the arrival of Indochinese refugees in the 1970s. Asian immigrants also had historically higher rates of naturalization than Europeans. Between 1976 and 1995, Asia was the leading region of birth among persons naturalized.

Increases in legal immigration from North American countries, especially following the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, reduced Asia’s share of naturalizations. During the 1991-98 period, the proportion

Chart O
Persons Naturalized by Decade and Selected Region of Birth: Fiscal Years 1961-98



Source: 1998, Table 53; 1961-97, previous *Yearbooks*.

of persons naturalizing who were born in Asian countries fell to 38.1 percent, while the proportion from North America climbed to 38.9 percent (Chart O). North America became the leading region of birth of persons naturalizing in 1996. In 1998, nearly one-half (45 percent) of new citizens were born in North America compared to 33.2 percent in Asian countries and 12.7 percent in Europe.

Mexico was the leading country of birth of persons naturalizing in 1998 with 112,442 or 24.3 percent of the total. Other major countries of birth for naturalizing citizens were Vietnam (30,185), the Philippines (24,872), India (17,060), the Dominican Republic (21,092), the People's Republic of China (16,145), Cuba (15,331) and Jamaica (15,040).

Immigration Reform and Control Act

Aliens legalized under IRCA accounted for 85,517 naturalizations, or 19 percent of all naturalized citizens, in 1998. The majority of IRCA legalized aliens who naturalized (67 percent) were born in Mexico. The total number of IRCA legalized aliens who had naturalized by the end of 1998 stood at 516,828, or 19 percent of the total 2.68 million.

Years in immigrant status

The median number of years of residence between the date of legal permanent residence and the date of naturalization was 9 years among aliens who naturalized in 1998. In recent years, the median has fluctuated between 8 and 9 years. Regional variation persisted in

Table I
Median Years of Residence by Year of Naturalization and Region of Birth:
Selected Fiscal Years 1965-98

Region of birth	1998	1995	1990	1985	1980	1975	1970	1965
Persons naturalized	9	9	8	8	8	7	8	7
Europe	8	9	10	9	10	8	9	7
Asia	9	7	7	7	7	6	6	6
Africa	8	6	7	7	7	6	6	6
Oceania	12	11	10	8	8	7	9	8
North America	10	14	11	13	11	9	7	9
South America	10	10	9	8	9	10	7	7

1998. African born immigrants spent a median of 8 years in immigrant status compared with 9 years for Asians, 8 for Europeans, 10 for South Americans, and 10 years for North Americans (Table I). IRCA immigrants naturalized sooner than non-IRCA immigrants (8 years vs. 12 years, respectively).

Understanding the Data

Data Collection

The INS compiles two types of data on naturalizations: workload statistics and demographic statistics on the characteristics of persons who naturalize. Workload data include the number of naturalization applications received, the number of petitions filed, and the number of aliens approved for naturalization during a fiscal year.

Demographic data come from the naturalization application and include: date and country of birth, gender, marital status, state and metropolitan area of residence, occupation, date of admission for permanent residence, and section of naturalization law. These data are obtained from either an automated case tracking system in operation in the larger INS offices, manually coded records from the smaller offices, and, if not otherwise available, from the Central Index System (CIS) of INS.

Limitations of Data

Data on naturalization shown in the *Statistical Yearbook* are obtained from information reported on Form N-400, the application for naturalization for persons ages 18 and over. Until 1998, the data also included information from

Form N-600, the application for certificate of citizenship for children. The N-600 is optional and used to provide evidence of citizenship for children under age 18 who automatically derive or acquire citizenship through their parents. The N-600 data may have represented as many as 3-4 percent of the naturalizations reported annually through 1997.

Aliens who become U.S. citizens through the legislative process also are not covered in the naturalization data collected by the INS. A recent example of the legislative procedure occurred upon the dissolution of the Trust Territory of the Pacific through which the Northern Mariana Islands became a commonwealth of the United States, making its residents U.S. citizens.

The 1998 naturalization data understate the demand to naturalize because of a continuing backlog of applications pending a decision. The demographic characteristics of aliens whose cases were in the backlog are unknown.

In addition, the number of cases with missing data was higher in 1996 and 1997 than in previous years. This is because the Central Index System (CIS), the source of data for about 100,000 cases in 1996 and about 60,000 cases in 1997, does not maintain information on state and metropolitan area of intended residence, marital status, occupation, provision of naturalization law, country of former allegiance, and in some instances, gender. In 1996, cases with information supplied by the CIS came from areas where INS offices use manual coding systems, that is primarily states and metropolitan areas with low concentrations of immigrants.